



Exodus - Chapter Thirteen

- I. Exodus 1:1-18:27 - The Exodus of Israel from Egypt (continues)
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Summary of Chapter Thirteen

The Lord commands that all firstborn should be consecrated to him. Moses then instructs all the people that they are to keep Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread every year when they reach the Promised Land as a reminder that the Lord had brought them out of Egyptian slavery in the month of Abib. Moses then explains how and why the firstborn are to be consecrated to the Lord their God in remembrance of how he had freed them.

Although they had a large fighting force of men, God did not take the direct route to the Promised Land as that would bring them into the land of the Philistines before they were ready to fight. Instead, God led them east towards the wilderness in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Moses took the bones of Joseph so they could be interred in the land of Canaan.

¹ The Lord said to Moses: ² Consecrate to me all the firstborn; whatever is the first to open the womb among the Israelites, of human beings and animals, is mine.

Exodus 13:1-2

In addition to the yearly sacrifice of the Passover, as described in 12:1-13, Israel is also called to consecrate to the Lord all the firstborn in Israel, whether animal or human. The instructions for how and why this is to be carried out are given in vv.11-16. This reminds Israel that, when the Egyptian firstborn died in the tenth plague, the Israelites were spared, something God would remind them of frequently, including: <<*For all the firstborn among the Israelites are mine, both human and animal. On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I consecrated them for myself*>> (Numbers 8:17).

Consecrate means ‘make holy by giving to God.’ Thus the firstborn of sacrificial animals, such as sheep and cattle, had to be sacrificed. However, firstborn donkeys and humans had to be redeemed: a lamb was offered in sacrifice instead of them (vv.12-13).

Is mine. This was for three reasons. First, because Israel was God’s firstborn (4:22), and this practice honoured that fact. Second, because the firstborn was thought to be the best, and the best was always given to God. Finally, as a reminder to all generations of when God redeemed Israel, his firstborn from Egypt.

I.d.xi.6 Exodus 13:3-10 - The Festival of Unleavened Bread

As the Passover in 12:1-27 looks forward to Israel’s life in the Promised Land, these verses call the people of Israel to faithfulness in celebrating the Festival of Unleavened Bread.

³ Moses said to the people, ‘Remember this day on which you came out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, because the Lord brought you out from there by strength of hand; no leavened bread shall be eaten.

Exodus 13:3

The repeated statement that the Lord brought his people out by strength of hand, as stated also in v.9, v.14, and v.16, frames the instruction of this section and acts as the grounds upon which Israel is called to be faithful in keeping both the Festival of Unleavened Bread and the consecration of all the firstborn. As a reminder of the Lord’s power, it also seems intended to encourage Israel to fear the Lord and not the nations who inhabit the land of Canaan.

⁴ Today, in the month of Abib, you are going out. ⁵ When the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, which he swore to your ancestors to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, you shall keep this observance in this month.

Exodus 13:4-5

The instruction of vv.2-16 focuses on the time when the Lord will bring Israel into the land of the Canaanites. With the repeated statement that the Lord brought Israel out of Egypt ‘by a strong hand’ (v.3), Moses encourages Israel to see that faithfulness to these two statutes is a part of being formed to fear the Lord and not the nations who inhabit the land.

A land flowing with milk and honey is an indication of all the benefits, both material and spiritual, that God intended to provide for his people once they settled in the Promised Land. It was as he had promised them: <<*So shall you be my people, and I will be your God, that I may perform the oath that I swore to your ancestors, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey, as at this day. Then I answered, ‘So be it, Lord’*>> (Jeremiah 11:4b-5), and: <<*On that day I swore to them that I would bring them out of the land of Egypt into a land that I had searched out for them, a land flowing with milk and honey, the most glorious of all lands*>> (Ezekiel 20:6).

⁶ For seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a festival to the Lord. ⁷ Unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days; no leavened bread shall be seen in your possession, and no leaven shall be seen among you in all your territory.

Exodus 13:6-7

These instructions relate to the Festival of Unleavened Bread, which is initiated by the celebration of Passover and is observed for seven days, refer to 12:14-20.

On the seventh day there shall be a festival to the Lord. At the same time, the days of Unleavened Bread were not joyless. The time began and ended with a festival - a party. A walk of purity in the Lord is a life filled with joy: <<*Thus says the Lord of hosts: The fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be seasons of joy and gladness, and cheerful festivals for the house of Judah: therefore love truth and peace*>> (Zechariah 8:19), <<*I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete*>> (John 15:11), <<*May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light*>> (Colossians 1:11-12), and: <<*I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children are walking in the truth*>> (3 John 4).

⁸ You shall tell your child on that day, “It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.”

Exodus 13:8

Israel is called once again not only to faithfully participate in the statutes of the Lord but also to tell their children what they mean: You shall tell your child on that day. The purpose of the retelling of such events is clear: <<*He established a decree in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our ancestors to teach to their children; that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and rise up and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments*>> (Psalm 78:5-7).

⁹ It shall serve for you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead, so that the teaching of the Lord may be on your lips; for with a strong hand the Lord brought you out of Egypt. ¹⁰ You shall keep this ordinance at its proper time from year to year.

Exodus 13:9-10

The Lord's statutes were to be so normative and governing for life in Israel that they would be like marks on your hand and on your forehead. In a wordplay related to the part of the body responsible for both eating and speaking, i.e. the mouth, faithfulness is described as having the result that the teaching of the Lord may be on your lips; that is, you will always be saying it to yourself or teaching your children: <<*Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise*>> (Deuteronomy 6:7), and: <<*Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night*>> (Psalm 1:1-2).

God wanted the deliverance from Egypt to be constantly at hand and before their eyes. The Jews used this passage, along with Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21, to institute the practice the wearing of phylacteries - small boxes holding parchment with scriptures on them, held to the forehead or hand with leather straps. Later, Jesus condemned the abuse of the wearing of phylacteries among the Pharisees. They made their phylactery boxes large and ostentatious as a display of supposedly greater spirituality: <<*They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long*>> (Matthew 23:5). In the end times there will be a Satanic imitation of this practice when the number of the Antichrist will be applied to either the hand or forehead of all who will take it: <<*Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, so that no one can buy or sell who does not have*

the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name>> (Revelation 13:16-17).

I.d.xi.7 Exodus 13:11-16 - The Consecration of the Firstborn

As he has just done with regard to the Festival of Unleavened Bread, Moses explains how and why they are to consecrate their firstborn animals and children to the Lord.

¹¹ ‘When the Lord has brought you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your ancestors, and has given it to you, ¹² you shall set apart to the Lord all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your livestock that are males shall be the Lord’s. ¹³ But every firstborn donkey you shall redeem with a sheep; if you do not redeem it, you must break its neck. Every firstborn male among your children you shall redeem. ¹⁴ When in the future your child asks you, “What does this mean?” you shall answer, “By strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. ¹⁵ When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from human firstborn to the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the Lord every male that first opens the womb, but every firstborn of my sons I redeem.” ¹⁶ It shall serve as a sign on your hand and as an emblem on your forehead that by strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt.’

Exodus 13:11-16

When the Lord has brought you into the land of the Canaanites. The law of dedicating the firstborn to God was only to take effect once they had arrived in the Promised Land. By then the need for a reminder of the work of deliverance from Egypt would be all the more necessary.

You shall set apart to the Lord all that first opens the womb. This was another way in which Israel’s pattern of everyday life was to reflect the fact that they were the people that the Lord had brought out of Egypt; refer to also 34:19-20. Every firstborn was regarded as belonging to the Lord. Firstborn animals were to be sacrificed, redeemed by the sacrifice of another animal, or killed. Firstborn children were to be redeemed (v.13) by the sacrifice of a lamb. Like the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread, parents were to be faithful in both the doing and the telling of consecration: **When in the future your child asks you, “What does this mean?” you shall answer.**

But every firstborn donkey you shall redeem with a sheep; Every firstborn male among your children you shall redeem. If the firstborn was unacceptable as a sacrifice, i.e. if it was an unclean animal or a human child, a substitute was offered to redeem the firstborn from God. This was even to be the case with the infant Son of God: <<*When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, ‘Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord’), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, ‘a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons’*>> (Luke 2:22-24).

It shall serve as a sign on your hand and as an emblem on your forehead that by strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt. This practice of dedicating the firstborn to God would be a reminder through ritual of God’s great work and strong power for Israel.

I.d.xi.8 Exodus 13:17-22 - The Pillars of Cloud and Fire

In his mercy, God decided to spare the Israelites an early encounter with the Philistines and so he led them personally eastwards towards the wilderness.

¹⁷ When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, ‘If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt.’

Exodus 13:17

The coastal route, the Via Maris, known as ‘the way of the sea’, was the shortest and most common way to go from Egypt to Canaan. Yet it was also the road where Egypt’s military outposts were. Although the Lord has clearly shown through the plagues that he can bring his people victoriously through the land of the Philistines, he mercifully chooses to take them on another route that will not lead to immediate armed conflict. However, this route will result in Israel being hemmed in between the Red Sea and Pharaoh’s army of chariots, refer to 14:5-9, and will call them to a different sort of challenge. Before the Lord calls Israel to trust that he will fight through them, as he will do with the Amalekites in 17:8-16, he will show them once again how he will fight for them; refer to 14:13-14.

¹⁸ So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness towards the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of the land of Egypt prepared for battle.

Exodus 13:18

Towards the Red Sea. In the accounts of the crossing of the sea (15:4, Deuteronomy 11:4, and Psalm 106) the water is often referred to as *Yam Suph*, which is also the Hebrew phrase in this verse. Some modern scholars interpret *Yam Suph* as ‘Sea of Reeds/Papyrus’ because the term *suph* refers to the reeds growing along the Nile River, as used in 2:3. Because papyrus does not grow along the Red Sea/Gulf of Suez, some scholars have concluded that the *Yam Suph* is one of the marshy lakes in the eastern delta region north of the Red Sea. Support for this is claimed from the Egyptian document Papyrus Anastasis III, which describes a ‘papyrus lake’ not far from the city of Rameses that could be identified with the *Yam Suph* of the Exodus account. Many scholars have concluded from this that the Israelites crossed a marshy area of a lake rather than a large body of water such as the Red Sea. Other scholars disagree, proposing that *suph* is not related to the Egyptian word ‘papyrus’ but rather to a word that means ‘end’, Hebrew *sop*. And, thus, the *yam suph* would literally mean ‘the sea of the end,’ that is, the sea at the end of the land of Egypt, i.e. the Red Sea. The Septuagint translates *yam suph* into Greek as *tēn erythran thalassan*, literally ‘the red sea’, here and elsewhere. In addition, every certain reference to *yam suph* in the Bible refers to the Red Sea or its northern extensions in the Gulfs of Aqaba and Suez, e.g. 1 Kings 9:26 and Jeremiah 49:21. This suggests that the name *Yam Suph* is best understood to denote the Red Sea/Gulf of Suez and, therefore, the Israelites crossed this major body of water when they fled Egypt.

¹⁹ And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph, who had required a solemn oath of the Israelites, saying, ‘God will surely take notice of you, and then you must carry my bones with you from here.’

Exodus 13:19

Taking the bones of Joseph carried out his last wishes: <<*Then Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am about to die; but God will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.’ So Joseph made the Israelites swear, saying, ‘When God comes to you, you shall carry up my bones from here’*>> (Genesis 50:24-25); it reaffirmed for Israel that God had kept the promises he had made so long before. Hebrews 11:22 sees Joseph’s desire to be buried in the Promised Land as evidence of his faith in God’s future blessings, including <<*a better country, that is, a heavenly one*>> (Hebrews 11:16b); a theme confirmed throughout Hebrews Chapter 11.

God will surely take notice of you, and then you must carry my bones with you from here. Genesis 50:25-26 says specifically that Joseph was never buried. His coffin laid above ground for the four hundred or so years until it was taken back to Canaan. It was a silent witness all those years that Israel was going back to the Promised Land, just as God had promised. Now the promise was being fulfilled.

²⁰ They set out from Succoth, and camped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. ²¹ The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. ²² Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

Exodus 13:20-22

They set out from Succoth, and camped at Etham. This marks the second leg of their journey towards the wilderness. The exact location of Etham is unknown.

The Lord went in front of them. God showed his presence to Israel in a dramatic way, by giving them constant assurance, with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. The pillar was also there as a sun and a shield: <<*He spread a cloud for a covering, and fire to give light by night*>> (Psalm 105:39); or as it says in Psalm 84:11 <<*For the Lord God is a sun and shield; he bestows favour and honour. No good thing does the Lord withhold from those who walk uprightly*>>.

A pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light. The ancient Hebrew for pillar literally means ‘something standing.’ It was probably more of what we would think of as a column than a pillar. According to Clarke this was the *Shekhinah* or divine dwelling place, and was the continual proof of the presence and protection of God.

Throughout the events of Exodus, cloud and fire accompany and signify the presence of the Lord: at the Burning Bush (3:2), in giving the people manna (16:10), on Mount Sinai (19:18), and in the tabernacle (40:38).

Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people. Israel could draw great assurance from this visible evidence of God’s presence. Nevertheless, there were still many occasions after this when they seemed to doubt, to rebel, and to act as if God were distant.